Contemporary Christian Nationalism in the US

Author(s):
Alder, Cora; Schäublin, Emanuel

Publication Date:
2021-07

Permanent Link:

https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000490707 →

Contemporary Christian Nationalism in the US

The disputed presidential election in 2020, culminating in a mob storming the Capitol, poses challenges for US democracy. In a polarized society, an increasingly confrontational version of Christian nationalism gains support among mostly white Americans who oppose efforts to address racial injustice and gender inequality.

By Cora Alder and Emanuel Schäublin

On 6 January 2021, the US Congress met in a joint session to confirm Joe Biden's victory in the presidential election. On that day, supporters of then-president Donald Trump gathered in Washington DC seeking to "Stop the Steal" and overturn the election results. After Trump delivered a fiery speech, his supporters stormed the US Capitol. Next to Confederate flags and Trump signs flew banners reading "Jesus Saves" or "Jesus 2020" in the winter winds. Alongside adherents of QAnon and other groups promoting conspiracy narratives and white men in military vests, other protestors kneeled to the ground and prayed. Defying the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, several thousand protesters on the Hill that day blended symbols of Christianity and conspiracy imagery with icons of conservative US patriotism.

Proud Boys and supporters of the police during a counter-protest opposing Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Portland, Oregon in August 2020. *Maranie Staab / Reuters*

The images flickering over the screens of millions of Americans and around the world marked a new climax of polarization in the political landscape of the US. Many people watching seemed puzzled by the mix of far-right and militant groups, Trump supporters, and the Christian Right present at the Capitol. Analysts pointed to "Christian nationalism" as one possible lens to analyze what connects many of these different movements. Christian nationalism centers on the idea that the US is a distinctively Christian nation inscribed in a divine plan. This view manifests in different forms throughout modern US history. It builds on the narrative that America is the "Promised Land" of white Christians arriving from Europe in the 17th century who are said to have formed a covenant with God (in analogy to the Jews in ancient Israel). According to their belief, as long as they follow God's laws, the country will thrive.

Today, adherents of Christian nationalism see themselves in a struggle against "progressives" in order to defend their specific

vision of Christian America – some of them even resorting to armed violence when needed. In its current form, Christian nationalism cuts across many Christian denominations, but it also divides them. In fact, there are conservative Christians who oppose the identitarian and militant character of this new strand of Christian nationalism. They condemn its conflation of religious with political authority and denounce its discriminatory effects.

As such, US society remains deeply divided. The dynamics around Christian nationalism are crucial for understanding the polarization of US society and the resulting challenges for democratic institutions. The phenomenon is largely driven by deep fears about progressives changing the fabric of society. Adherents of Christian nationalism seem to be unsettled by various strands of progressives calling for the acceptance of alternative gender roles, a new historiography of slavery, and a meaningful way of addressing racial injustices.

Christian nationalism is neither a particular branch of a religion nor a faith on its own, but a cultural viewpoint.

Christian Nationalism Today

Among the mob attacking the Capitol, Christian nationalism appears to be one of the unifying factors. Leading scholars Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry characterize contemporary Christian nationalism as a "pervasive ideology constituted by identities, values, and historical narratives that center on preserving or 'restoring' the preeminence of an identitarian and embattled form of Christianity in American civic life". Christian nationalism is neither a particular branch of a religion nor a faith on its own, but a cultural viewpoint. While they do not self-identify as Christian nationalists and the contours of Christian nationalism remain blurry, adherents do share several key assumptions of how the world should be. These assumptions include the premise that the US nation and founding documents – for example referring to the Second Amendment protecting the right to bear arms – are divinely inspired. From this vantage point, the nation appears as a divine project with God acting through America. God and country are linked: to be American means to be Christian. Adherents of Christian nationalism want the government to unapologetically privilege Christians and to ensure the Christian character of the nation and its civic culture.

Beyond emphasizing the divine character of the nation, adherents of Christian nationalism share normative assumptions about "genuine" American identity (and consequently about who is not a proper member of US society and its political landscape), a commitment to political conservatism, and an ideal of traditional gender roles. According to a survey by Perry and Whitehead, about 20 per cent of Americans strongly embrace Christian nationalism. These are predominantly members or proponents of the Republican Party and most likely to be found in the South and the Midwest. A smaller number of Independents and Democrats, however, also stand in support. Christian nationalism has gained ground in different Christian denominations, enjoying support among a majority of white Evangelicals as well as among important segments of mainline Protestants, Catholics, and even among a small number of Black Protestants. Pastors and priests speaking out against Christian nationalism create tense debates within congregations, which is why many remain silent on the topic.

The wider framework of Christian nationalism is able to accommodate broad segments of politically conservative Americans as well as different fringe movements including the anti-government sentiment of the Three Percenters, the masculinist far-right views of the Proud Boys, and various groups propagating conspiracy narratives. As a cross-cutting category, the concept of Christian nationalism acts as a bridge between different concerns such as gender (heteronormative ideals), patriarchy (men's leadership, women's submissiveness), nativism (US born), race (whiteness), religion (Christianity), political ideology (conservatism), and party alignment (the Republican Party under Trump).

In the US, the group of "religiously unaffiliated" keeps growing. An increasing number of people think the US should not formally favor Christianity. This leaves adherents of Christian nationalism with a sense that Christianity's former prominence in civic life is at peril. In this spirit, Christian nationalism has its own versions of the "elect" or people chosen by God to fight for Christianity's persistence: individuals who are politically conservative, usually white, and born in the US should control the political process. Trump framed his presidency in such terms. In him, adherents of Christian nationalism saw an unapologetic defender of Christian *and* American cultural values. Trump was portrayed as "Making American Great Again" and realigning the country with God's divine plan. His promotion of US exceptionalism was in line with Christian nationalism viewing foreign cultural influences as undermining America's supremacy among other nations. Consequently, adherence to Christian nationalism was among the strongest predictors of voting for Trump in 2016 and 2020. It comes as no surprise that many adherents of Christian nationalism showed their support for Trump in the streets of Washington DC on 6 January 2021.

According to recent opinion polls, 53 per cent of Republicans believe that Trump was the true winner of the 2020 presidential election. Thus, many still view the Biden presidency as illegitimate. This disputed presidential election is a major risk factor for increased polarization and the outbreak of violence. At first glance, fringe groups such as the Proud Boys or the Three Percenters and their willingness to use violence seem to be the real threat to US democracy. A closer look, however, reveals that the ability of an invigorated Christian nationalism to mobilize and unite important parts of the conservative white middle and working class constitutes perhaps a more serious challenge to democratic institutions and procedures.

Areas of Polarization

When conflict flares up between groups with distinct worldviews, people fear that the respective other side will seek to impose its views upon their own community. Many conservative Americans feel unsettled by progressive movements seeking to unearth the dark side of US history, to dismantle structures in society that are considered racist, and to enable ways of life based on alternative gender roles. Contemporary Christian nationalism directly speaks to these fears, which are exacerbated by other polarizing factors, such as the urban-rural divide, media silos as well as economic instability and job insecurity accelerated by the pandemic. A common reaction in such situations is to sacralize issues of dispute in an attempt to push back against perceived change. In this vein, adherents of Christian nationalism defend patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks in society. The following examples highlight the opposition of Christian nationalism to redefining gender roles, revising US history, and acknowledging racial prejudices.

Further Reading

Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, ***Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
Drawing on multiple sources of national survey data as well as in-depth interviews, Whitehead and Perry document how Christian nationalism shapes what Americans think about who they are as a people and how they think about many political issues.

Philip Gorski, ***American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
Gorski traces the historical developments and destructive struggle between religious nationalism and radical secularism. He offers an unsparing critique of both, demonstrating how half a century of culture war has drowned out the quieter voices of the vital center.

Sophie Bjork-James ***The Divine Institution: White Evangelicalism's Politics of the Family*** (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021).
Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, Bjork-James highlights white evangelicals' use of theology around strong gender and sexual identities that ground the nuclear family and its influence on political support for conservative government policies.

For adherents of Christian nationalism, conservative white families constitute the norm. The "God-designed" nuclear family is the societal foundation whose destruction is said to lead to social chaos. Many supporters of Christian nationalism reclaim traditional "masculine" virtues. A "good father" bears full responsibility for his family and is prepared to resort to force to protect it. He commands discipline, order, and obedience. He fulfills God's will. As anthropologist Sophie Bjork-James observed, people with such a mindset tend to be disconcerted by non-binary gender categories and homosexuality because it threatens the heteronormative model so central to their way of life.

Furthermore, many adherents of Christian nationalism seem unsettled when the history of racial violence in the US and the consequences of slavery and oppression are publicly acknowledged, such as in the 1619 Project. "1619" is a series of articles published in the New York Times focusing on Black Americans' contributions to US history linking the nation's prosperity to the practice of slavery and its continued effects in the present. Adherents of Christian nationalism, however, primarily view US history through the lens of white religious castaways arriving from Europe and forming a covenant with God for a heavenly nation. Their internalized image of the US' founding is, therefore, irritated by a new historiography focusing on non-white experiences.

Many adherents of Christian nationalism seem disconcerted by the Black Lives Matter and other civil rights movements. They appear unwilling to acknowledge the injustices ethnic and racial minorities experience in the US, particularly concerning police brutality. For many of them the authority of law enforcement is divinely ordained. Such readings endow the police and its role in maintaining order in the US with a sacred character. Many adherents of Christian nationalism deny racial disparities in the US criminal justice apparatus. Consequently, there are "a few bad apples" among police officers, but police killings are explained in terms of victims' "lack of respect for authority and obedience". In a reaction to Black Lives Matter, they promote the slogan "Blue Lives Matter" to support people who work in law enforcement, leading to a politicization of the police with uncertain consequences.

Implications

The increasing popularity of Christian nationalism has three implications. First, political polarization raises questions related to public security. Armed insurgencies arise from fear, from the feeling within certain groups that others are encroaching on their territory or wealth, and from a lack of trust in the government as a legitimate broker to address social conflict. Groups prone to violence at the fringes of Christian nationalism contest the government's monopoly on the use of force. White militia groups organize and train in woods across the country or patrol the desert at the Mexican border to deter illegal immigrants. Such militant groups have occasionally fought against Black Lives Matter protesters and anti-fascist (Antifa) groups in the streets of various US cities. According to counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen, there is a real and present danger that middle class people, guided by fear, will increasingly take up arms and organize in the name of "self-defense" on both sides. The skyrocketing weapon sales in the US in 2021 suggest that such preparations are underway.

Second, these developments threaten the stability of institutions and the political system. The 2020 presidential election contributed significantly to the public mistrust against state institutions. As a result, state authorities are no longer trusted as legitimate organizers of free and fair elections. The election procedures have become politicized to a point where those who strongly embrace Christian nationalism tend to support anti-democratic measures, such as making it harder for non-white Americans to vote. The Republican Party largely supports these voter suppression attempts by calling for "election security". Since the presidential election, legislators have introduced restrictive provisions in 48 states, including measures restricting absentee and mail-in voting or introducing time limits for handing in ballots. Against this background, the resurgence of Christian nationalism occurs in a context where the foundations of democratic institutions have become highly politicized.

Third, the public sphere and social cohesion are disintegrating to some extent. The US media landscape is notorious for its politically partisan television channels and news outlets. This leaves viewers exposed to deviating representations of reality, making it very difficult for them to assess the veracity of news content. In this situation, many are affected by "confirmation biases" or the propensity to only consider as true what fits into their own worldview, allowing disinformation to spread on all sides. Moreover, major social media networks continue to ban far-right leaders (as well as several anti-fascist groups), further fragmenting the public debate. Silicon Valley-based tech companies such as Facebook and Twitter have banned Trump from their platforms based on allegations that he spread disinformation about election fraud and incited the mob to storm the Capitol. As a result, voices regrouped in largely decentralized networks on Telegram and on other platforms whose servers tend to be based outside the US and whose potential for organizing orchestrated actions is very difficult to predict.

Many conservative Americans feel unsettled by progressive movements seeking to unearth the dark side of US history and to dismantle structures in society that are considered racist.

Countering Disintegration

The Biden administration faces the delicate task of countering the disintegration of the US political landscape and getting the public to return to a minimally shared and depoliticized vision of US society, which can rebuild trust in government institutions and the electoral process. This requires the politically highly delicate task of acknowledging and constructively addressing fears on all sides of the political spectrum. The respective narratives of adherents to Christian nationalism and progressives need to become more attuned to one another in a way that opens up possibilities other than a zero-sum confrontation. This may require developing an ambitious new vision for the US in the 21st century. Such a vision could build on narrative elements promoted by Christian conservatives, Christians committed to social justice, and various kinds of secularist progressives. To be successful, such a vision needs to reimagine the political community in the US, offering constructive roles to people from both sides of the polarized spectrum.

The respective narratives of Christian nationalists and progressives need to become more attuned to one another in a way that opens up possibilities other than a zero-sum confrontation.

It will be crucial to encourage conversations among (conservative) US Christians on historical memory and the role of Christian narratives within it. Smaller networks of Christians criticizing Christian nationalism on theological grounds are forming, but they remain scattered. Social media has helped to highlight critical Christian voices on militant masculinity (such as Kristin Kobez du Mez's book "Jesus and John Wayne") and racial injustice (such as Jemar Tisby's "The Color of Compromise"). However, at this point, the resonance of these voices among the adherents to Christian nationalism remains difficult to assess.

The next four to eight years will be crucial for the future development of US democracy. If attempts at recovering a basic societal consensus in the public sphere fail, tensions between US states strongly influenced by adherents of Christian nationalism and those siding with the Biden administration are likely to intensify. There may be attempts to undermine the authority of the federal government. Moreover, if Donald Trump maintains his position within the Republican Party until 2024, the party will continue to accommodate insurrectionist groups and leave moderate conservatives estranged. These developments continue to divide religious congregations into adherents of Christian nationalism and those who think that venerating the flag is idolatry. In any case, the 2024 electoral procedures will be heavily politicized. This risks inflicting further damage on US political institutions with repercussions for democracies around the globe.

For more on perspectives on Meditation and Peace Promotion, see CSS core theme page.

Cora Alder is Program Officer in the Mediation Support Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich.

Emanuel Schäublin is Senior Program Officer in the Mediation Support Team at the CSS.

The opinions expressed in this piece reflect the authors' personal views.

CSS Analyses in Security Policy is published by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich. The CSS is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. Each month, two analyses are published in German, French, and English.

Editor: Névine Schepers
Proofreading: Benno Zogg
Layout: Miriam Dahinden-Ganzoni

Feedback and comments: analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
More editions and online subscription: www.css.ethz.ch/cssanalyses

ISSN: 2296-0244; DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000490707